



# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

## news release

### FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release October 21, 1987      Albuquerque, NM: Tom Smylie      505/766-3940  
Washington, DC: David Klinger      202/343-5634  
Craig Rieben      202/343-5634

#### MULTI-STATE RAID NETS 41 PEOPLE FOR ILLEGAL SALE OF EAGLES AND OTHER PROTECTED BIRDS

One of the country's largest trading areas for Indian souvenirs and artifacts (Gallup, New Mexico) has been the focus of a major undercover investigation by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The operation ended today with the anticipated arrest of 17 people and the filing of charges against 24 others for illegal sale of eagles and other protected birds.

The investigation centered on the illegal killing and sale of protected birds, including whole carcasses, feathers, and parts which were fashioned into replicas of Indian artifacts and bought by commercial dealers and collectors.

The Interior Department agency announced that more than 600 Federally protected migratory birds were illegally killed during the past 18 months by individuals who were part of a poaching network extending into nine Western and Southern States. The over 50 species of birds, including 60 bald and golden eagles, as well as falcons, hawks, owls, and various species of songbirds, were killed in Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Louisiana, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Wyoming, and Texas.

"Today's action serves notice on those who would destroy our natural heritage that they will be brought to justice for their crimes," said Secretary of the Interior Don Hodel.

"We take our mission to protect wildlife very seriously," Fish and Wildlife Service Director Frank Dunkle said. "This is a clear and strong signal to law violators that we will extend our law enforcement capability to the maximum to halt illegal trade that depletes wildlife populations."

Arrest warrants were issued for 17 individuals identified by Service agents as wildlife traffickers who were charged with felony violations of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the Lacey Act, a law which makes it a Federal violation to transport or sell illegally taken wildlife. The other 24 have been summoned to appear in court at a later date on various wildlife law violations.

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Ultimately, more than 50 people in five States are expected to be charged with violations of wildlife laws as a result of this investigation. A Fish and Wildlife Service spokesman said that craft stores, trading posts, and pawn shops in the Gallup, New Mexico, area provided a major market for parts of protected birds killed by poachers.

"This is another in a long-standing series of undercover operations by Federal wildlife law enforcement agents aimed at cracking the illegal trade in protected birds," said Secretary Hodel. "Sooner or later, violators will start getting the message that if they poach wildlife, they are going to be apprehended."

Armed with intelligence from State conservation officers about a lucrative market for whole bird carcasses and artifacts made from wildlife, Federal agents in the Southwest began in 1986 posing as dealers in such items. They were offered whole bird carcasses, as well as feathers, tails, wings, and feet, for use in fashioning traditional Indian crafts such as headdresses, peyote fans, lances, rattles, and jewelry. More than 100 illegal transactions were made involving 50 protected species of birds. During this investigation, 83 kestrels (small birds-of-prey known as "sparrow hawks") were sold to agents.

In addition to citing particular individuals who allegedly killed wildlife, the Fish and Wildlife Service discovered that shopowners in Gallup sold many of these illegal wildlife products, dealing either directly with poachers or through middlemen who procured the items. Prices for unfashioned bald and golden eagle tail feathers ranged between \$100 and \$350 per set, while finished eagle tailfeather fans fetched between \$200 and \$800 apiece. Blue jay, woodpecker, and red-shafted flicker carcasses brought \$10 each, while those of Harris' and Swainson's hawks and great horned owls cost up to \$50.

Today's action follows several previous major operations by the Fish and Wildlife Service against traffickers in protected bird species. In 1983, 39 people were convicted of killing and selling as many as 300 bald eagles and other migratory birds, most of which were taken on a national wildlife refuge in South Dakota. In 1981, 32 dealers of artifacts in Arizona, New Mexico, and Oklahoma were convicted of selling 4,000 scissor-tailed flycatchers, 155 bald and golden eagles, and various owls, hawks, and woodpeckers. Also in 1981, 16 people in Washington State were convicted of trafficking in bald eagles and other species.

The maximum penalty for violation of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act is 2 years in jail and a \$2,000 fine; under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, 1 year in jail and \$5,000 (penalties which double for second convictions); and under the Lacey Act, 5 years in jail and \$20,000.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Single black-and-white glossy photographs of evidence connected with the case may be obtained by calling 202-343-5634.